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FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2066
INFO RUCPDO/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC PRIORITY
RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 4639
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2443
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2308
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 2887
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 3182
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000016

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [EINT](#) [ECPS](#) [ECON](#) [ETRD](#) [SOCI](#) [RU](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMEN AUTHORITIES GRADUALLY EXPAND PUBLIC INTERNET ACCESS

REF: 08 ASHGABAT 736

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: There have been signs over the past year that the Turkmen government intends to expand public access to the Internet for citizens. In December, Ashgabat residents began reporting success in getting connected. However, such access is still an expensive luxury item for most people. Turkmenistan's purchase of foreign internet technologies is making this possible, but the modest nature of these purchases and the gradual expansion of public internet access suggests that the government prefers to move forward on internet slowly and carefully. END SUMMARY.

DIAL-UP EXPANSION IS HAPPENING

13. (SBU) In December 2008, local contacts and staff reported that state-owned Turkmen Telecom had begun taking more subscribers for its dial-up internet service, substantially reducing the waiting lists that were previously reported. To get connected to the internet, Turkmen Telecom now requires local citizens to submit both a letter of request and a statement proving they have no outstanding landline telephone service debts to Turkmen Telecom, along with a fee of 600,000 manats (nearly USD 42), which includes a monthly fee of 115,000 manats (USD 8), a subscription fee of 115,000 manats (USD 8), and a 370,000 manat (USD 26) deposit. The initial connection process is still burdensome, due to the long lines people have to stand in to obtain a statement from the city telephone service showing that their payments are up-to-date. Once connected, access to the internet costs 12,000 manats (84 cents) per hour.

14. (SBU) Extending service to more subscribers became possible in part after the December 2007 delivery of \$1.6 million worth of new equipment from the Russian company "TechnoServe," according to Turkmen press. Newly-installed internet technology was to have extended the dial-up connection service to as many as 20,000 new users. Despite the technical upgrades Turkmen Telecom has reportedly made since 2007, citizens still report that getting online is difficult, especially in the evening, due to overwhelming demand. Even the lucky subscribers who get onto the internet, however, are being connected to a censored Web. Authorities are

continuing to block access to undesirable content by providing a list of banned websites to Turkmen Telecom, according to a local staff employee with dial-up access. Foreign-based opposition websites like www.gundogar.org, www.watan.ru and www.chrono-tm.org are blocked.

MTS PUSHES FASTER AND MORE EXPENSIVE GPRS SERVICE

15. (SBU) Meanwhile, Russian cellular operator "Mobilniye Tele Sistemy" (MTS) has been providing General Packet Radio Service (GPRS), a mobile data service technology launched in June 2008 which has gradually decreased in cost. The cost of the service was originally one dollar per megabyte of traffic, but now costs 58 cents during the day and 29 cents at night to upload and download data. The new service allows users to use mobile internet anytime and at any location where MTS has coverage. In addition to its convenience, the GPRS service also provides higher speed, compared to Turkmen Telecom's. Although MTS has reduced the price of GPRS, it is still unaffordable for most Turkmen citizens. The initial subscription fee for GPRS is just USD 5.75, but sending and receiving data is more costly. In Russia, MTS reportedly offers GPRS service at 10-15 cents per megabyte. In October 2008 the total number of MTS subscribers in Turkmenistan exceeded 800,000 and nearly 40 percent (or more than 320,000) of them use GPRS service, according to an MTS operator.

16. (SBU) COMMENT: The expansion of internet access to more users is an encouraging sign of progress in a society hungry for knowledge and contact. The costs of obtaining such access, however, will remain out of reach for most citizens, few of whom own personal

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computers or have room in their budgets for such non-essential expenses. Given the government's decision to initially expand access to the Internet via dial-up technology to only 20,000 users, it would appear that the Turkmen government prefers to open the door to the internet a little at a time. END COMMENT.

MILES